

Subj: **Confederate Coin - 1861 New Orleans**
Date: 4/30/2012 5:24:30 P.M. Central Daylight Time
From: watson.leclear@gmail.com
To: ericnumis@aol.com
Dear Mr. Newman,

Thank you so very much for taking my call this afternoon. I was thrilled that I was able to find you and hopefully you can give me some information about my family. I am the great great granddaughter of Harriet Ames. She had a son by the name of Dr. Edward York Ames who was my great great uncle. In the article I am attaching, it says he had possession of one of four confederate coins minted in New Orleans in 1861, and that you were the current owner and that it is in the Newman Coin Museum at Washington University in St. Louis. I think that is wonderful.

My purpose in contacting you is to try to understand how my great great uncle was able to get the coin, how long he kept it and did he sell it directly to you or did it go through other hands. I am trying to put together the genealogy of my family and I find this part to be of great interest. Any help you could give me would be wonderful and would mean so much to me and our family. I am also interested in the history of coins.

I live in Houston and have just retired, so at long last, I have time to learn of my ancestry. You sound like a wonderful person and it appears you have had a wonderful life as a numismatist and author.

I do hope we can continue our correspondence.

Regards,

Patti Watson LeClear

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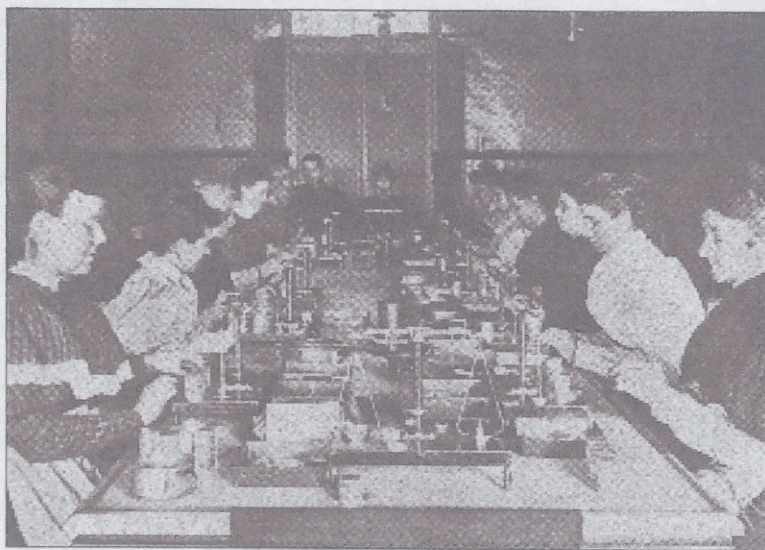
Months before the first shots were fired on Fort Sumter in April 1861, Louisiana seceded from the United States . . .

of construction for the New Orleans Customhouse, was directed to "examine and make an estimate of repairs" at the New Orleans Mint. Trained at West Point as a civil engineer, Beauregard supervised various federal building projects before he began his career in the Confederate Army. In a report dated May 9, 1864, he recommended that the entire mint building be rendered fireproof by removing wooden floor sections, adding iron beams and installing a galvanized roof.



The Confederates Take Control

Months before the first shots were fired on Fort Sumter in April 1861, Louisiana seceded from the United States, declaring itself an independent republic. The Louisiana Secession Convention was held in the state capitol in Baton Rouge on January 26, 1861. With a vote of 113 to 17 in favor of secession, Convention President Alexander Mouton declared "the connection between the State of Louisiana and the Federal Union dissolved, and that she is a free, sovereign, and independent power."



▲ A female mint employee feeds blanks into a coin press (top), while a corps of women uses delicate scales to weigh planchets.

When the Secession Convention reconvened in New Orleans on January 29, an ordinance was adopted that allowed federal workers to continue in their posts as employees of the State of Louisiana. The State took possession of the New Orleans Mint on January 31, keeping the same officers. On February 1, a committee of five was formed to inventory the property of the "late Federal Union within the Parish of Orleans." It was reported to the Convention that

the mint vaults contained a half million dollars in gold and silver.

By March 21, the Secession Convention had accepted the Confederate Constitution. An ordinance was enacted stating that "Louisiana doth hereby cede unto the Confederate States of America the right to use, possess [sic], and occupy all the forts, arsenals, lighthouses, the mint, customhouse, and other public buildings acquired by the State from the late United States." On April 1, the Confederate States of America took possession of the mint, again retaining its officers. Because of a lack of bullion, the mint ceased operations in late April, but the staff remained on duty until May 31.

The New Orleans Mint was the only facility to strike coins with a uniquely Confederate design. Years later, Benjamin F. Taylor, chief coiner of the New Orleans Mint during the Civil War, described the circumstances under which the coins were struck. In a letter to the War Department in Washington, he wrote:

. . . In the month of April, orders were issued by Mr. Memminger, Secretary of the [Confederate] Treasury, to the effect that designs for half-dollars should be submitted to him for approval. Among several sent, the one approved bore on the obverse of the coin a representation of the Goddess of Liberty, surrounded by thirteen stars, denoting the thirteen States from whence the Confederacy sprung, and on the lower rim the figures, 1861. On the reverse there is a shield with seven stars, representing the seceding States; above the shield is a liberty cap, and entwined around it stalks of sugar cane and cotton, "Confederate States of America." The dies were engraved by A.H.M. Peterson, Engraver and Die Sinker, who is now living in Commercial Place. They were prepared for the coining press by Conrad Schmidt, foreman of the coining room (who is still living), from which four pieces only were struck. About this period an order came from the secretary suspending operations on account of the difficulty of obtaining bullion, and the Mint was closed April 30, 1861.

Taylor kept the two dies and one of the four coins, which now resides in the American Numismatic Society collection in New York City. The other three coins have quite a pedigree. One owned by Dr. Edward Y. Ames presently belongs to numismatist/author Eric P. Newman.

Another owned by John Leonard Riddell was acquired by numismatist Lester Merkin. The fourth coin, once held by Jefferson Davis, president of the Confederacy, was sold by Stack's of New York in 1995 to a private collector.

In 1862 United States Marines, under Commodore David Farragut, seized control of New Orleans and raised the U.S. flag atop the mint. New Orleanian William Mumford, along with three other men, removed the flag and tore it to pieces. Mumford, a well-educated but reckless man with a love of drink, defiantly wore shreds of the flag in his buttonhole. He eventually was arrested and sentenced by U.S. Army General Benjamin Butler to be hanged in front of the mint on June 7, 1862.

Mumford's execution was reported in newspapers throughout the North and South. In response, Confederate President Jefferson Davis proclaimed General Butler a "felon, deserving of capital punishment." Davis also ordered that if Butler was captured, he was to be executed immediately.

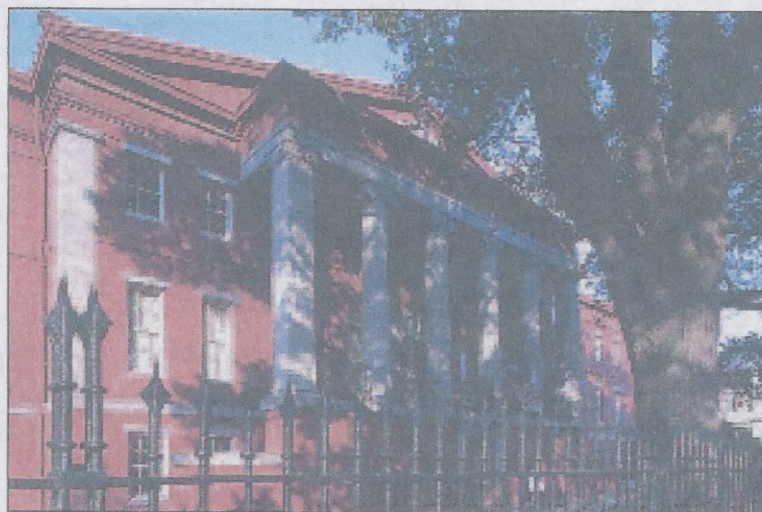
New Life for the Old Mint

Following the capture of New Orleans, Dr. M.F. Bonzano was ordered to take possession of all mint property for the federal government. The mint reopened as an assay office in October 1876, with Bonzano functioning as assayer in charge and as superintendent. In 1877 Bonzano was asked by special mint agent James R. Snowden to report on the repairs and machinery needed to bring the New Orleans branch mint back into full, operational order. Bonzano noted that the melting department and refinery needed work and additional machinery. The coining department required a new press to strike Trade dollars. Boilers installed in 1855 had begun to deteriorate.

The New Orleans Mint resumed coining operations in 1879. It was the only mint in the South to reopen after the Civil War.

A series of political struggles ensued for the next 30 years. Many thought the New Orleans Mint was superfluous and existed merely as a form of political patronage for Louisiana legislators. Given the facility's aging machinery and competition from the Denver and San Francisco Mints, it became increasingly more difficult to justify the cost of operations in New Orleans. By June 1911, after production had been halted for two years, machinery began to be dismantled and shipped to the Philadelphia Mint.

In 1922 a supervising architect for the Treasury Department issued a report describing the general decay into which the building and its remaining machinery had fallen:



PHOTOS: LOUISIANA STATE MUSEUM

... The attic and building generally contains old decayed tanks, masonry furnaces, old iron, piles of paper, mud and dead pipe and gas lines and flues, etc., and many holes in masonry floor arches exist without any apparent reason. Surface dirt and cobwebs exist practically throughout the building, the accumulation of years, and there is no janitor force employed. The rear lot and courtyard is filthy with trash, cans, old abandoned machinery, decayed and falling wooden and sheet metal sheds and shacks and an old brick chimney.



▲ The Old New Orleans Mint on Esplanade Avenue is one of five national landmarks in the historic French Quarter maintained by the Louisiana State Museum. Learn more by visiting lsm.crt.state.la.us/lsm.htm.

At this time, the assay department still operated on the third floor. A Naval Recruiting Station and a Veterans Bureau dispensary and dental clinic operated in other parts of the building. The architect recommended in his report that the assay department relocate to the New Orleans Customhouse, where it could share the use of a newly built bullion vault.

His advice finally was taken in 1931, when the mint building was converted into a federal prison. In 1943 the prison closed. The building functioned as a Coast Guard Receiving Station until the middle 1960s, when it was transferred from the federal government to the State of Louisiana and placed under the stewardship of the Louisiana State Museum Board. In 1979 the mint opened to the public as a part of the Louisiana State Museum complex.

Today, the New Orleans Mint building exhibits few of the problems that plagued it during its tumultuous decades of service. It stands as a testament to man's ingenuity—and frailty. ☉